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AUTHOR Gullatt, David E.; Lemoine, Dwayne A.
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ABSTRACT

The truancy problem has become one of the most troubling issues that school administrators face while attempting to reform public education. This paper describes the legal evolution of efforts to reduce school truancy and the economic impact of truancy on society. Solutions range from reducing the number of required years of schooling to eliminating compulsory schooling entirely to raising the allowable exit age. The paper also identifies the social causes of truancy. A conclusion is that the multimodel approach to reduce truancy involving the family, student, and the school has proven to produce the most effective results. The intervention program, according to Brown (1983), should include therapy for conduct disorders or other problems contributing to truancy, extra academic help through tutoring, and incentives for good attendance. (Contains 22 references.) (LMI)

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THE SCHOOL TRUANCY DILEMMA

a professional research article

written by

David E. Gullatt, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership
College of Education
Northwestern State University of Louisiana
Natchitoches, LA

and

Dwayne A. Lemoine
Rapides Parish School Board
Alexandria, LA

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The School Truancy Dilemma

Introduction

"Truancy is a serious problem in our society. It impacts the truant, the school, and society, in general. Moreover, truancy is often a predictor of future dropout tendencies" (Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994, p. 203). The truancy problem has become one of the most troubling issues school administrators face while attempting to reform public education. While researchers look for answers to this dilemma, several factors arise. These factors make any solution to school attendance become a complicated maze of information for school administrators to sort out in the hope of finding the correct answer to a school's individual school truancy dilemma. The legal evolution of efforts to reduce school truancy is presented in this research along with information about the economic impact of truancy upon society. Finally, social causes for truancy will be addressed to inform administrators of the role of society concerning truancy.

The Truancy Problem

National estimates indicate that from 10% to 19% of school children are truant on any given school day; and that on an average Monday, many urban secondary schools have an absentee rate as high as 33% (Rood, 1989). Tuck and Shimburi (1988) indicated that in Washington D.C., 10% of students were truant each day. In the Aurora, Colorado school district of approximately 1500 students, it was reported that between 250 and 300 unexcused absences occur each day (Stine, 1990). It has been observed that many school principals were greatly concerned about the increase in absenteeism. Studies indicate that students with the highest truancy rates are the same students with the lowest achievement

levels who frequently appear on the drop-out lists (Bell et al., 1994; Bos, Ruijters, & Visscher, 1990; McCaughlin & Vachu, 1992). States throughout the country have begun to battle against teen delinquency by adopting stringent laws that hold parents responsible for the acts of their children. In California, parents may be fined or jailed for allowing their children to participate in gangs while in Arkansas parents can be fined when their children skip school (Shapiro, 1989). In Louisiana, one school district will fine parents if their children are found on the streets during school hours ("Parents to Pay," 1997).

The Legal Efforts to Eradicate Truancy

According to Horace Mann, the fight against truancy and student dropouts is a necessity for society to prosper.

> Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men--the balance wheel of the social machinery... It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor. (Walsh, 1993, p. 128)

The founding fathers of American democracy placed a high premium on education. They felt that an educated populace was the only way to perpetuate a democratic society as enjoyed in America. However, due to a governmental philosophy popular during the framing of the U. S. Constitution, each state in the union was given the authority to organize, finance, and oversee its public education efforts. Thus, differing ideas arose over: (a) the beginning age for school children, (b) how much education was enough, and

(c) what attendance rules were best for those within the mandatory age of school attendance.

Early Efforts to Mandate School Attendance

During the first half of the nineteenth century there were no anti-truancy laws in any states. Factories used young children with minimal education to process materials and operate machinery that is forbidden today by intricate child labor laws. Gradually the importance of education and a philosophy protecting the young from the dangers of factory labor prompted legislation supporting public school attendance. As a result, the first compulsory school attendance law was enacted in Massachusetts in 1853 and in New York one year later. Furthermore, the philosophy that a state's interest should take precedent over parental rights to govern the activities of the child is the basis for both compulsory attendance and child labor laws according to Alexander and Alexander (1992).

In 1900, 3 out of 10 workers in mills of the South were children under 16 years of age, and 57.5% of those children were between 10 and 13. By 1912, all southern states had adopted an "age-and-hour" limit and some prohibition against night work of children (Valente, 1994). By the 1930s, all states had enacted compulsory school attendance laws.

How the Courts View School Attendance

The issue of compulsory school attendance has been, and continues to be, a volatile area of dispute between those who agree for broader and universal education and those who seek a more limited use of education for particularized purposes and interests. The courts, however, have generally resolved the dilemma by maintaining that education is

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vital to the welfare of the state, and that the requirement that all persons be exposed to schooling is not an unreasonable or arbitrary exercise of state power. According to Bos and Wurtz (1994), mandatory attendance laws have been justified on the basis of their necessity for effective citizen participation in a democracy and protection of children from permanent and substantial harm. They further stated that some critics argued that mandatory schooling should be replaced with mandatory education laws.

The Importance of Education for All

The legal authority for any state to require that children attend school is basically found in the common law doctrine of parens patriae, the idea that the state is the father of all persons. In carrying out its duties of parens patriae, the state has the responsibility to go as far as necessary to protect children from the incompetence of their parents.

> It is the unquestioned right and imperative duty of every enlightened government, in its character of parens patriae, to protect and provide for comfort and well-being of such of its citizens as by reason of infancy... were unable to take care of themselves. The performance of these duties is justly regarded as one of the most important of governmental functions, and all constitutional limitations must be so understood and construed as not to interfere with its proper and legitimate exercise. (Alexander & Alexander, 1992, p. 200)

The above philosophy comes from an English precedent and is repeated and reinforced in the nineteenth century case of County of McLean v. Humphrey (1882). It is

from this ruling of the past that the state obtains its power to hold parents responsible for the truancy of their children.

Differing Views of Mandatory Attendance

Wise (1994) suggests that reducing the number of required years under the compulsory attendance laws or even abolishing compulsory attendance laws altogether is the direction schools must take in dealing with truancy. When the attendance records and grade-point averages (GPA's) of secondary school students at Tiffin Columbian High School in Tiffin, Ohio, were analyzed, only a small correlation existed between students' GPA's and the number of days in attendance according to Wise (1994). Wise argued that motivation and ability to learn have the greatest impact on academic achievement. He advocated the elimination of compulsory education, with the recommendation that twelve free years of education be offered by public schools, regardless of age, so that the individual could choose when he/she was ready to be educated.

In contrast, South Dakota raised the allowable exit age from school from fourteen to sixteen years of age in 1990. This action appeared to have reduced the number of youths on the streets and made educators more aware of the many ways in which students are capable of learning (Grady, 1994). However, there has also been an increase in the number of uninterested students and a lack of training and resources for teachers to meet the needs of those students according to Grady. In Nebraska, a person sixteen years or older is to be excused by school authorities if he or she successfully completes a minimum competency test. This state is also considering raising its exit age limit from sixteen to

eighteen, or high school graduation. Louisiana public education laws allow for a student to quit school with parental permission at age 16 and of the student's own choice at age 17.

The debate over compulsory school attendance and the exit age from school will always be an issue of great concern and one with many valid viewpoints. Laws governing compulsory school attendance will continue to be enacted at the state level and must be enforced by administrators. An administrator's concern will be the impact these laws will have in conjunction with their own school truancy program.

Economic Impact of School Truancy

It is important to note that society pays a great price due to the problem of truancy. Students that have a high truancy rate will be more likely to drop out of school at one point or another (Bull, Montgomery, & McIntosh, 1993). Dropouts then enter the work force practically uneducated, and, therefore, have difficulty finding and keeping jobs. One should then recognize the need to reduce truancy and prevent students from dropping out of school.

Walsh (1993) notes that dropouts are three and one-half times as likely as high school graduates to be convicted of a crime. The progression from truancy to juvenile crime to adult crime is so likely that in Georgia, more than 82% of all adult prison inmates are high school dropouts. It was also noted by Walsh that school failures are 6 times more likely to be unwed parents and seven and one-half times more likely than graduates to be dependent on welfare. Consequently, each school failure cost society a minimum of $440,000 in lost earnings and foregone taxes over a lifetime, according to the Committee

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for Economic Development, a New York-based public-policy organization funded by Fortune 500 companies (Walsh, 1993).

The price society pays for teenage delinquency is without question a high one. It is also evident that truancy is a root to many future problems that would serve as a detriment to any society.

Social Causes of School Truancy

With the modernization of American society, schools are faced with the ever-growing problem of how to encourage children to attend and stay in school. This problem has blossomed due to a number of issues such as: (a) the break-up of family structures, (b) changing curriculums, (c) working mothers, and (d) growth of schools and communities (Blackburn, 1993). Many school systems throughout the nation are addressing the truancy problem by employing various policies such as: (a) academic penalties, (b) parental sanctions, and (c) truancy suspensions. One new educational trend is to use computer technology to help reduce or eliminate truancy by keeping an accurate account of student absences. Blackburn further stated that the underlying cause of truancy may be society, itself.

According to Mooney & Young (1993), in the United Kingdom, truancy, delinquency, and poverty are said to be all closely related, but the government may be confusing symptoms with causes. The above research was prompted by an increase in youth crime in the United Kingdom in the past few years. In an attempt to correlate single parenthood with the rise in teenage crime, Mooney and Young stated:

> It does not appear that the fact of lone parenthood is itself associated with crime but the children of lone parents are more likely to be brought up in poor families, and this appears to be associated with low educational attainment and delinquency. (p. 36)

In Japan, Itsuno (1993) determined reasons for school refusal by students. He found that there are two viewpoints concerning determining why students refused to attend school. One viewpoint attributed all school refusals to functional nervous disorders held by truants, while the other viewpoint included a wide range of explanations for why students refused school. The latter was the most common viewpoint and reasons are expressed as follows: (a) neurotic emotional confusion, (b) mental disorders, (c) poor academic performance, (d) emotional disabilities, (e) maladjustments to transferring schools, and (f) lack of valuing education. Of all students polled in Itsuno's survey, 41.8% said the school was the reason for school refusal, and 29.2% said family life was the reason.

In Chicago, 142 families in shelters were interviewed in an investigation to determine the effects of stress due to a family crisis has on truancy, failure, and dropping out of school (Dohrn, 1991). A basic educational need of children is continuity and stability in schooling. Yet most children interviewed in this study attended three or more schools in the 1990-91 school year alone. The consequences of this problem were obvious. The vast majority of these students repeated a grade or dropped out of school. The social cost was calamitous. Not a single parent or child interviewed was aware of the

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McKinney Act or had been informed of options by school personnel or shelter employees. The Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987 provides states with the funding necessary to investigate the needs of homeless children, in particular educational needs, and develop plans to overcome them (Pawlas, 1994). It is under this act that parents would be allowed to keep their children in home schools when they must move into a homeless shelter in another school's attendance zone according to Dohrn (1991). More than two-thirds of the parents indicated that had they known of such options they would not have moved their child. Dohrn further concludes that basic provisions within the law to aid in such circumstances are not being implemented.

Rohrman (1993) suggests that truancy can be traced to four causes: (a) an unsupportive school environment, (b) lack of community support, (c) chaotic family life, and (d) personal deficits. Bell et al. (1994) also suggest that a multimodal approach, combining student, family, and school factors, would greatly enhance truancy intervention programs. It is important that an administrator carefully look at the student population within the school before imposing any anti-truancy measures. The home-life of students will have more to say about the truant behaviors of its students than any other single factor (Rohrman, 1993).

Intervention Assistance

Research has shown that three steps are necessary to successfully intervene in assisting with the school truancy dilemma. The first is in assessing the causes of the truancy problem and the individual needs of the student and to then establish a program accordingly (Brown, 1983). According to Brown, any intervention program should consist

of such components as: (a) therapy for conduct disorders or other problems contributing to truancy, (b) extra academic help through tutoring, and (c) offering incentives for good attendance.

The second step in intervention is to meet with family members to assess the extent to which the truant behavior could be due to familial dysfunctions or conflicts. If this is the case, then family therapy should be initiated to help solve these problems. Involving the parent in the child's education and attendance problem could prove to be very beneficial.

The third and final step in this multimodal intervention approach is to entail changes within the school system. Having the school's attendance policy and consequences for unexcused absences clearly stated and consistently enforced is probably the most important factor in this step. This task directly involves the secondary school administrator. An effective school administrator will motivate teachers to hold high expectations of all their students, require make-up work for all absences, and offer incentives and rewards for good attendance.

Summary and Conclusions

Many researchers indicate that truancy is a major concern for school administrators (Bell et al., 1994; Rood, 1989; Stine, 1990; Took & Shimburi, 1988). This concern is evidenced by compulsory attendance laws that states have mandated in an effort to combat truancy (Wise, 1994) The need to educate all citizens of the United States has always been a major issue for our governmental leaders of past and present (Alexander & Alexander, 1992).

The causes of truancy have also raised concern for our educational leaders. Social issues such as: (a) the break-up of the family, (b) the consolidation of schools, (c) lack of community support, and (d) an unsupportive school environment, indicate that society plays a major role in the truancy problem of today (Rohrman, 1993). The progression from truancy to juvenile crime to adult crime, is so likely that truancy becomes the root to many societal problems (Walsh, 1993). Further, current research reveals that the school is where the battle to control truancy should be fought. With this in mind, the school administrator is in the best position to combat truancy within the school (Kube & Ratigan, 1992).

The multimodal approach to reduce truancy involving the family, student, and the school has proven to produce the most effective results (Bell et. al., 1994). According to Brown, the intervention program should consist of such components as: (a) therapy for conduct disorders or other problems contributing to truancy, (b) extra academic help through tutoring, and (c) offering incentives for good attendance.

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